

Latino Male Students' Perceptions of Writing in First Year College Writing Courses

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Abstract: Writing skills are vital to college and career success; therefore, students who do not succeed in writing will likely struggle in their subsequent coursework. Latino male college students are the most at-risk group. Following a single case study approach, this qualitative study examines the writing perceptions of three Latino males in their first-year college composition course at a community college in Houston, Texas. Using a LatCrit theory framework, the study provides counterstories regarding the relationship between prior writing experiences and relevant racial issues in higher education.

Keywords: community college, Latino male students, first-year writing, LatCrit

Writing skills are vital to college and career success; therefore, students who do not succeed in writing will likely struggle in their subsequent coursework. According to the most recent report from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating board (2018), 58.3% of students entering Texas community colleges “do not meet the Texas Success Initiatives (TSI) standard for college readiness” (p. 7), with 45% of them below minimum standards for writing. Among those students most at-risk are Latino males (Hall & Rowan, 2001). For the past several years, data documented this population’s declining success rates. According to *Excelencia in Education* (2019), Latino males had the lowest level of degree attainment (21%) compared to White (46%), Asian (60%), and Black (29%) male students; their female counterparts also surpass them in degree attainment (27%). Their success in future courses is largely dependent on learning how to write at an academic level.

Although researchers are studying Latino college success, gaps remain. Ceja (2016) notes that “how Latino males envision and come to understand their postsecondary opportunities remains largely unexplored” (p. 192). Quantitative data has established disparities between Latino students’ and other ethnic groups’ success, but educators and researchers now yearn to understand *why* those disparities exist. To solve the problem, “we must understand more clearly what hybridity and difference mean for students, how they interpret their lives and experiences, and how these perceptions impact persistence, resilience, and self-efficacy at the individual human level” (Pyne & Means, 2013, p. 196). The purpose of our study is to research the perceptions of Latino students about writing who are currently enrolled in corequisite ENG 1301 courses. Two research questions guided our study: How have their previous experiences with writing shaped their perceptions? What internal and external factors contributed to their perceptions of writing?

Theoretical Framework

Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit) (Valdes, 1996) framed our study. This theory is best suited for our study because our participants all identify as Latino and are currently in their first-year

composition course, widely acknowledged as a gateway course to their success in college. In recent years, educational researchers have used LatCrit as a lens to study the systemic challenges facing the Latinx population that critical race theory does not (Bernal, 2002; Pyne & Means, 2013). According to Villalpando (2004), there are five defining elements that form the basic assumptions of LatCrit: race and racism on the different dimensions of their identities, contest dominant ideology, social justice to achieve educational equality, recognize experiential knowledge, and lastly, a focus on the historical context of their educational experiences.

Methodology

Among the many approaches to qualitative research, we chose to follow a single case study approach, using emergent design (Schwandt, 1997) to address the research questions. Creswell and Poth (2018) defined case study as a “qualitative approach in which the investigator explores real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) . . . over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information . . . and reports a case description and case themes” (pp. 96-97). This case study is bounded within a specific institution (Lone Star College-University Park), a specific course (first-year composition), and specific ethnicity and sex (Latino male). We conducted formal interviews with three participants, Daniel, Mark, and Luis, to gain a clearer picture of their perceptions of writing.

Findings

The prominent themes we identified in the data are supported by direct lines spoken by the participants. While our larger study identified three major themes, we will share only one in this paper: Previous Experiences with Writing. All three participants acknowledged that their perceptions of writing were shaped early-on in their lives. Luis recalls his mother, whose first language is Spanish, prompting him to write in Spanish “[at] maybe five or six [years old]”:

At the time, I spoke more Spanish than English, so it came easier to me. But later, . . . it flipped. I knew more English than Spanish, and I had to work on my Spanish more to get it even, I guess. That's one of my earliest memories of writing in Spanish.

He later shared his memories with writing in English: “When it comes to [writing in] English, I remember . . . at first I didn’t like it because I had to think a lot about it. Obviously, you’re small—you’re just learning at the moment.” Luis appeared to have two separate experiences with writing: one experience with Spanish and one experience with English. Daniel also recalled his first experience with writing in elementary school: “My teacher told me, like ‘Hey, you’re a good writer,’ and I felt really good about that. So, I got more confident and started to like writing more, you know?” Daniel’s first experience learning about writing early in his school years seemed to establish a positive foundation for his writing skills.

Unlike Daniel, Mark’s early experiences with writing were not positive: “I was a bookworm when I was in elementary school. That’s the funny part because I didn’t like writing, but I was a bookworm.” Interestingly, Mark’s love of reading did not extend to a love of writing. In high school, Mark’s view of writing changed for the better and raised his confidence level when he received high marks: “It got me excited that I never gotten a four on an essay, and once I started seeing fours stack up, like, damn, you know?” Mark credits his improved grade with a change in his attitude during high school: “It happened in junior year that I probably didn’t like writing as

much, either. But I started toward the end of the year, [thinking] I need to actually try in writing and so I did." Mark recognized that his attitude needed to change and that it was within his ability to improve his writing skills. Luis also shared his memories of writing as he grew older: "It got easier to me. . . . [I] actually liked writing, but when it came to, like, assignments, I wouldn't like it." Luis revealed that he did not perform well when writing required a predetermined structure.

All three participants shared vivid memories, not only of their experiences with writing, but also their positive and negative experiences with writing teachers. Daniel's elementary teacher seemed to positively influence his view of writing: "She was the one who always helped me with my writing to improve more every day." Daniel's positive interactions with teachers occurred in high school as well: "She would tell me, 'Hey, just work on this and this and this—but other than that, you're doing great'". Daniel seemed to respond well to constructive feedback from his teachers about his writing. Mark recalled that he was so surprised by his first high essay score in high school that he questioned his teacher: "I went up to her and was like, 'Hey, are you sure you graded this right?' And she was like, 'Yeah, that was a good essay.' And I was pretty surprised." Both Daniel and Mark felt their writing skills improved and their confidence grow because of their positive interaction with their teachers.

Unlike Daniel and Mark, Luis's recollection about his teachers was mostly negative. Luis had his most memorable negative encounter in his junior year of high school: "She wasn't well-known for being the nicest teacher. She critiqued a lot about the essays. The essays...they would be very personal, I guess, so when she critiqued them, [her comments] felt kind of personal, right?" While Luis could not remember specific comments this teacher made, his overall impression of her was not positive. He summed up how his interaction with his teacher changed him:

You know Gordon Ramsay, the chef? . . . So, she would be like that way for writing. And I felt kind of out of place because most of the kids there, they would generally get better scores. That experience made me have a really bad view with writing. I didn't want to write at all after that year. I know senior year, I kind of gave up on writing because that kind of just ruined it for me. But up until then I had a pretty good experience with writing essays.

Luis expressed some introspection when he stated, "that one negative experience really ruined it for me, I guess." Luis found writing to be a deeply personal exercise and was permanently affected by the harsh and critical feedback he perceived from his teacher.

Discussion

When viewed through the LatCrit lens, the participants' distinct memories involving writing reveal significant counterstories to the dominant narrative. Luis indicated the difficulty he had when he was required to write in English in school after first learning and using Spanish at home. Research on Latino culture and education found "that writing in mainstream English could be difficult cognitively and emotionally for students who speak different home languages" (Kennedy, 2006, p. 185). The English-only instruction at schools, though, afforded all participants with more English writing fluency than Spanish writing fluency. Luis and Mark acknowledged that they struggled more with Spanish grammar as they grew up, which is a consequence of many first-generation Latino-Americans.

Notably, the influence of their teachers greatly impacted the participants' perceptions of writing. The importance of teachers in students' success is established by research conducted by Alfaro et al. (2006) who note, "that teachers' academic support was significantly and positively related to boys' academic motivation" (p. 287). Mark and Daniel both had positive experiences with their teachers from whom they felt supported but not necessarily challenged. The positively biased praise that Mark and Daniel received about their writing in K-12 did not, however, prepare them for the rigors of college writing. Harber et al. (2012) support that assertion: "Minority students who chronically receive positively biased feedback may be misled about where, and how ardently, to exert their efforts. . . . Unduly positive feedback demoralizes all students, causing them to regard praise as a consolation for deficient ability" (p. 1149). It is likely that Mark and Daniel's teachers viewed their writing with positive bias, elevating their scores and giving them a positively false sense of their writing ability.

Within the context of LatCrit research, this practice is a form of racism. Latino students are held to a lower standard than other students because educators do not think that they are capable of reaching a high standard. A study by Tenenbaum and Ruck (2007) found that "in general, . . . teachers hold more positive expectations for European American children than for African American and Latino/a children" (p. 267). Sadly, the teachers may think that they are doing the Latino student a favor with a positive bias when, in reality, they are setting the student up for future failure. Conversely, teachers' unconscious biases sometimes hold Latino students to an unattainable standard, such as the case with Luis and his "Gordon Ramsey" teacher: "Research illustrates that some teachers believe that some Latina/o students do not possess the ability to succeed" (Cavazos & Cavasos, 2010). We argue that when viewed through the LatCrit lens, the data from our participants reveal potential racist tendencies or prejudices of teachers toward these Latino male students.

Luis's negative experiences with writing colored his outlook about writing and his own abilities in the subject. This is in accordance with the work of Strambler and Weinstein (2010) who reported: "Students who perceived that their teachers gave them negative feedback also devalued academics more" (p. 163). Such findings support the thought that teachers are highly influential when it comes to student perceptions; therefore, teachers must be mindful of their comments and interactions with students and student work. Luis had already taken and failed the first-year composition course at the time of the interview. Each of his experiences with failure in writing classes reinforces his perception that he is just not any good at it.

Luis reacted deeply to his teacher's comments, taking each piece of feedback personally, because his writing was deeply personal to him. Research on instructor feedback establishes that "comments can promote confidence and may even communicate to students that they belong in college" (Calhoon-Dillahunt & Forrest, 2017, p. 321). Feedback from the teacher is a fundamental part of writing instruction and development, but many teachers may not realize how powerful their feedback is for students and what their comments are unconsciously communicating to students. LatCrit research by Quiroz (2001) underscored the impact of negative teacher perceptions by students, "with the most notable and poignant narrative aspect being the tendency of [students] to look to themselves as the primary cause for failure in school" (p. 344). The findings by Quiroz perhaps help to explain why Luis continued to struggle in his

education and turn to what he saw as non-academic subjects such as art and music for personal validation.

Despite their usefulness, “student narratives are uncollected data because they remain undervalued, underutilized, and readily dismissed by the institution because institutional racism is almost always narrowly viewed as a student of color problem rather than a campus-wide problem” (Figueroa, 2016, p. 54). Latino males are failing in college at alarming rates; qualitative data collection and analysis is one of the most effective approaches to find ways to combat this trend. Indeed, “counter storytelling can also serve as a pedagogical tool that allows one to better understand and appreciate the unique experiences and responses of students of color through a deliberate, conscious, open type of listening” (Bernal, 2002, p. 116). The participants were willing to share their experiences and appreciated the opportunity to relate their perceptions, contributing valuable data to LatCrit research.

Latino male failure in college is not inevitable, but neither is student success a one size fits all approach. Using student narratives is an effective method to determine the specific interventions each student needs, according to their individual needs. LatCrit theory, when used in conjunction with qualitative research methods, contributes significantly to developing ways to improve the success rates of Latino male students in college. This study contributes to a better understanding of the writing perceptions of Latino male students in an urban community college. We found that these students hold significant memories associated with writing; yet writing at the college level poses unique challenges for them. Future research should examine best practices from college instructors spanning a variety of disciplines who engage in writing projects with academically underprepared students.

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